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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses findings from an ongoing 3-year study of the impact of strategy training on Russian listening comprehension. In particular, the study focused on the techniques that encourage increased student control of their application of learner strategies. The research presented adds to prior research on listening training in second languages in three ways: (1) by focusing on training for bottom-up as well as top-down strategies for listening comprehension; (2) by focusing on training students to use different kinds of text genres in determining listening strategies; and (3) by comparing the impact of cognitive and metacognitive training in listening strategies against mere exposure to video on listening proficiency. (JL)

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Materials Selection in Strategy Instruction for Russian Listening Comprehension

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This presentation will discuss findings from an ongoing three year study of the impact of strategy training on Russian listening comprehension. In particular, we are concerned with techniques which encourage increased student control of their application of learner strategies, i.e. ways to enhance metacognitive ability. Our research expects to add to prior research on listening training for second language in three ways: (1) by focusing on training for both bottom-up as well as top-down strategies for listening comprehension, (2) by focusing on training students to use different kinds of text genres in determining listening strategies, and (3) by comparing the impact of cognitive and meta-cognitive training in listening strategies against mere exposure to video on listening proficiency.

This experiment is being conducted in regular Russian language classrooms as part of the normal curriculum. Our focus is on noninteractive listening, namely, listening to a video segment to derive its meaning rather than interactional listening where meaning between the participating parties can be negotiated. Use of video is an important way students can use to access their knowledge and begin to leverage that knowledge to promote their comprehension.

There are two teachers: one for the experimental group and one for the control group both of whom are the regular classroom

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teachers. Given the difficulty of the Russian language for American students, it is useful to note that third year Russian is approximately equivalent to first year Spanish, hence, students control a limited amount of vocabulary and morphosyntax. The experimental section teacher used the video to introduce some of the major cognitive and metacognitive strategies students would need while the control teacher used the video as a basis for conversation. (See the end of this paper for an inventory of the strategies the experimental teacher presented). For the first two months we used pedagogical materials prepared in Russia and distributed by SUNY because this more closely approximated the kind of controlled dialogues students are accustomed to. Then the teachers switched to authentic video materials taken from television and movies. We prefer using authentic materials because this provides an opportunity for students to approach real listening needs and to really use their skills in understanding a wide variety of speakers in a range of settings, and because it provides several kinds of text types.

We have selected segments from three kinds of texts: drama, news, and interviews. We selected only a few ads since two years ago there only were a very few of them and most were too technical. Cartoons were excluded because of linguistic and cultural difficulty. Nor did we select sports since this kind of segment requires a highly technical vocabulary. The three text types provide very different kinds of challenges for listeners. Movie or video dramas require listeners to attend to rehearsed dialogues which are generally free of false starts and usually have a clear

direction and development. Interviews are usually full of false starts and tend to ramble more, both of which are harder for listeners to follow. News is usually based on a written text which is read and is, as a result, propositionally very dense and difficult for listeners to absorb.

Each text type was usually facilitated by the use of certain major strategies which relate to the discourse structure:

drama: was most easily approached by use of a schema strategy, where the viewer looks for a storyline.

news: was most easily understood by use of a series of questions, looking for who, what, where, when, how.

interview: was facilitated by use of a question and answer strategy, using one to facilitate comprehension of the other.

At the beginning of the school year we administered two listening tests: one is a standardized test developed by Educational Testing Service which is only audiotaped. This is part of the Comprehensive Russian Proficiency Test, 1990, which tests four skills for levels native through intermediate high for speaking and writing and advanced for reading and listening. The other test is one we created which uses videotapes similar to those used in the instruction. In addition, students filled out two surveys: a background survey which asked about students' language knowledge, goals in studying Russian, and factors which helped or hindered progress in language learning and a belief survey which asked about their knowledge of individual factors which influence learning, their knowledge of language tasks, their

knowledge of general principles of language learning, their concepts about their own self learning (personal capability and responsibility) and their knowledge of specific cognitive and metacognitive strategies. In addition, students filled out the LASSI test of general learning and study strategies and part of the MLAT (numbers learning and phonetic script), an assessment tool designed to measure language learning aptitude.

Selection of authentic texts turned out to be an extremely time-consuming but important task. If materials are to promote strategy use they need to be selected very carefully so that they are sufficiently challenging for the student but are not so difficult that students stop attending to the material. We discovered in selecting materials that there are many important constraints on the segments selected.

1. The segment should be between thirty seconds and a minute and a half for beginning and low intermediate students. This is due to the fact that spoken Russian has relatively few easily recognizable everyday cognates for English speakers, Russian morphosyntax is so complex (particularly word order) , and Russian morphology obscures cognates, borrowings, and international vocabulary. Hence students at a low level of proficiency ~~can only~~ can only attend and process materials that are of about this length. It should be noted, however, that it is hard to find self-contained segments of such short duration and hence, the search process is quite extensive.

2. The visuals in the segment should not give away the whole text or students will not feel impelled to attend to the text and

hence will not really be working on listening comprehension. On the other hand, it is helpful if the video segments do provide some clues to the nature of the interaction. Preferably such visual clues should not conflict with the spoken message.

3. The segment should contain language that is difficult enough to challenge students and to require the use of strategies yet is not so difficult that it discourages students from trying at all. Some important language considerations include the following. The rate of speech delivery should not be too fast so that students are discouraged and do not attempt to segment the speech. The sound should be relatively clear--if it is too garbled or scratchy, then students, at least at this level of proficiency, may stop attending. Although fairly typical of movies, it is better if there is little or no conversational overlap, since this tends to confuse students. Major dialect differences were avoided since this was a barrier which prevented students from attending. Children speaking Russian also poses some problems for low level students since their articulation can be quite different from that of adults. Finally, the segment shouldn't rest on comprehension of highly technical vocabulary which is more than likely unknown to the students.

4. Materials should not be bound too much by time which is most commonly true of "hard" news. Since we intend to use the material over a two year period we wanted topics which would not fade once the event or individual is gone. This of course turned out to be quite difficult given the major upheaval that occured in the USSR during the course of our experiment. In addition, "old"

news is not very interesting or motivating for the students.

5. Materials should not require too specific background knowledge to understand the major schema of a segment. This turned out to be difficult to judge. For example, a segment about May Day celebration in Bratislava presented two major problems, our students didn't know where Bratislava was and more importantly, were unaware that May Day was Labor Day in much of the world. if a video segment involves world knowledge or cultural knowledge that students do not have it may inhibit expected use of particular strategies or inhibit the possibility of training unless this information is provided directly to the students.

Although using authentic video material is a very powerful way to enhance listening comprehension, its use does place constraints on strategy instruction. First of all, one can't constrain or select texts so that multiple opportunities to practice a single strategy are present. In contrast, in made-up texts, the teacher can try to present material that provides opportunities to practice a specific strategy. This attempt, however, can in fact backfire since when students are given free reign it is not always possible to predict which strategies they may use. Secondly, although we tried to select video segments which provided a single storyline or focus per segment, this was not always possible. With authentic texts there are often complications so that even texts as short as a minute may involve two or more stories or several news episodes and hence complicate the strategy instruction. Further, a single segment may even mix text genres. Thus, with authentic texts, it is not always possible

to simplify and structure material as neatly as one might in pedagogically driven materials.

Although the semester is not over and thus we cannot report on the impact strategy control training has had on listening proficiency, we do have some interesting observations about strategy training using authentic video.

It is clear that students enjoy the video lessons. At the end of the first ten video lessons, many students reported that (a) they wanted to watch different sorts of video in addition to just drama, i.e., they wanted to extend their listening range, (b) they wanted to have more real Russian television and movies (the first ten lessons were those prepared by SUNY) i.e. they liked the idea of authentic materials and (c) they wanted to work on the video segments in the language lab i.e., they wanted to spend more time on task. In fact, at the beginning of each lesson, students were often asked if they wanted to view another video and they were always quite positive about their interest. In addition, student attention during the video segment is always very focused indicating a high level of interest. Student evaluations of the video lessons at the end of the first semester were very positive.

In the first semester, students tended to work only with top-down strategies. However, in the second semester, as they got more accustomed to hearing the language and as they become less threatened by hearing speakers other than their teacher, some students have begun to use bottom-up strategies, focusing on individual words and segments, taking notes, looking the words up in the dictionary or asking about their meaning or derivation.

This contrasts markedly with the strategies used by students doing reading tasks. In this latter case, bottom up strategy use is much more common and students commonly need training in using more top-down strategies.

Although most listening strategy training has focused on top down strategy training, in particular, focusing on identifying the schema, effective listening comprehension requires training in going back and forth between top-down and bottom-up.

Most analyses of listening comprehension training tend to assume that it can follow that of reading comprehension training, however, we have concluded that listening requires separate development from reading. Compared to reading where readers can go back and forth in the text, listening is instantaneous and requires much faster online processing. Further, this online processing means that listeners must both decode and comprehend at the same time. Hence, students (especially beginning and intermediate students) must perforce begin by focusing more on top down listening so as to gain a handle on the text. With reading, students have the entire text in front of them and may use cognates or other familiar words to help them construct a schema. In reading, segmentation of words is automatic because words are separated and punctuation indicates ends of sentences. In listening, intonation and other prosodic information may not be processed and segmentation is a major problem. In addition, while reading students can deal with much longer segments because they are not required to process them immediately whereas in listening students are dependent on short term memory which has limited

storage capacity. In lower proficiency students, the STM bits are very short.

Although we began with a clear lesson plan indicating which strategies students might be expected to use to comprehend a segment, we found that it is not always possible to predict which strategy a student will in fact use. Students pay attention to a variety of signals in both the audio and video tract. For example, in a video segment which occurred in a train station, one student who couldn't understand the amount of change being returned looked at the number of bills returned and guessed at the cost of a ticket. This was an unexpected strategy which helped the student resolve an ambiguity. In another instance, students noted that the camera focused on a violinist's hand as she talked about learning fingering technique from her teacher, again something we had not noted.

Finally and most importantly, we have observed that students can be taught to control their use of listening strategies. When asked whether they wanted to view the segment with or without the sound on, students made a decision and were able to provide a rationale for their decision ("It's too distracting with the sound on" or "It doesn't help to have the sound off, if the segment consists of talking heads."). Further, if they chose "sound on" they were able to determine which main strategy they would use, namely, listen for key words. They were able to determine whether listening again would be helpful. If they chose to listen again, they were able to indicate which problem area they wanted to attend to. Students began to recognize that knowing the text type

provided clues as to the range of strategies that might be brought to bear and asked which text type would be presented in advance of a video viewing. Finally, students noted that not using a strategy could inhibit their ability to comprehend. As one student noted after watching an interview, "I should have used the "Listen for the Question" strategy which can be an important key to finding one's way through an interview.

INVENTORY OF LISTENING STRATEGIES

LANGUAGE

Listen to:
- cognates
- intenational words
- key words and phrases
- proper names
- familiar words
- partially familiar words
- repeated words and phrases
- tone of voice
- intonation

PREDICTION (words, sentences, or schema)

Use:
- visual information
- general world knowledge
- informatin from clip itself

GENRE OF THE CLIP

Determine:
- news report
- interview
- dramatic episode
- commercial

LOGICAL STRUCTURE OF THE CLIP

Notice:
- logic of the storyline
- logic of action
- logic of relationships

GOAL DEFINITION
- look for basic schema
- attend to specific words/phrases
- decide when enough is enough

ACTION PLAN
- listen with sound on or off
- determine how many times to watch
- break up into portions

MONITOR
- verify prediction(s)
- define source of difficulty
- jot down problematic portion(s)
- consider other strategies

RESOURCING
- discuss with classmate
- ask teacher